

CITIZEN SENSIBILITIES: COMPARING GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN FINLAND AND HUNGARY

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What ideas about citizenship and political practice are generated through activism? This paper presents an ethnographic view of environmentalists in Hungary and Finland, comparing how activists of the old "East" and "West" theorize their own work and its relation to ideas about democracy and citizenship. Here, we focus on the concept of "independence," which environmentalists in both countries use to describe political and knowledge practices. Our collaboration is inspired by a sense that ethnographic and comparative work on protest is currently an under-utilized yet potentially illuminating exercise. A key point of comparison that we think is worth exploring are the events and effects of 1989 and the reassessment of the logic of the Cold War. The present essay represents our first steps.

Hungary and Finland are both countries whose environmental movements first took shape during the Cold War at the periphery between the former Soviet Union and Western Europe, but on opposite sides of the boundary between "East" and "West." Hungary, on the one hand, was considered one of the most "Western" countries of the Eastern Bloc, with its experiments in "market socialism." Finland, on the other hand, was characterized by its geographically informed position of a not-quite-fully Western nation. In other words, certain enduring political identities were fostered in direct reference to the Cold War so that largely because of global geopolitics, both Finland and Hungary have had rather peculiar political orientations to the USSR. These orientations produced enduring political identities that have had impacts on the way environment has become part of the political agenda. How much overlap exists in the styles of eco-politics despite the politically "opposite" histories of these two countries, and how should it be understood?

This paper argues that across the range of Hungarian and Finnish environmental activism, the environmentalist sensibilities that lead to activism arise out of shared experiences of loss of trust in "official" sources of knowledge as well as unsatisfactory environmental conditions. Specifically, we compare and contrast the cultural logics that promote challenges to "official" political frameworks in both places. Our broader theoretical point is to suggest that not only the role of the state, but also political orientations in the Cold War landscape, impact significantly on the forms

environmentalism takes. In particular, we explore the connotations of the word "independence" in this light, and show that it has become a key term for environmentalists in the two locations, describing both activist practices and the knowledge produced through them. We suggest that despite the term's ubiquity across practically all known environmental protest, a situated analysis of its meaning, which incorporates its specific geopolitical dimensions, will yield insights into how the irruption of "eco-politics" onto the world stage and the end of the Cold War have been connected.

More broadly, our thoughts here are aimed at developing more fine-tuned questions about the usefulness of standard terms such as "citizenship" and "independence" for understanding the work of environmentalists, terms whose importance has been highlighted in Alan Irwin's work on environmental citizenship (Irwin 1995).

FINLAND

Through most of 19th century, Finland was part of the Russian Empire, and after independence in 1917 it developed a national culture and political style of its own. Following WWII, Finland remained independent from the Soviet Union, though somewhat diminished in size. In postwar Finnish politics, the Soviet Union posed an external threat, in relation to which Finland had to live a consensus. From 1944 through the 1980s, a ubiquitous slogan, "Finland lives off the forest" expressed one dimension of this culture and politics of consensus. It made explicit the very close connection between the national, forestry-dependent economy, and related national allegiances to state forms of knowledge production – that is, expertise about how best to manage and use the forests. An extensive research and expert machinery of professionals covered all aspects of forest use and claimed for itself the epithets of "national" but also "independent", based on the claim that its work was scientific and disinterested. The accompanying forest consensus was extended to and embodied in institutions like the State Board of Forestry (now renamed in a more eco-friendly language, the Forest and Park Service) or the Finnish Forest Research Institute, as well as in regular inventories and statistical explorations of the nation's forests (Berglund 2000).

Fear of Soviet displeasure provided powerful legitimization for pursuing a vigorous politics of consensus in foreign (Soviet) relations, but also on everything else. Thus, environmentalism, when it became more allied with anti-bourgeois values in 1960s and 70s, was represented in media and government as anti-patriotic terrorism at worst, and misguided and foolish at best. Although forestry's utter economic primacy had already begun to erode in the 1970s, it was only after the events of 1989 and the subsequent massive recession in Finland that the cracks in the "forest consensus" turned into nationally significant cleavages.

These events were of crucial significance in the political sphere generally, but the point to emphasize here is that they paralleled a shift in the idea of independent knowledge about forests.

Environmental protest (nuclear, water, forests) did exist from the 1960s, and accelerated in the 1980s, but arguably 1989 was a watershed. Directly related to the Cold War legacy, the vast forests along the Cold-War border between Finland and Russia, Russian Karelia, literally part of a curtain, not iron but timber, now became available for exploitation by Finnish and a few Swedish logging companies as the border opened. But for the environmentally minded, this was Europe's last wilderness (Berglund 1997, Kleinn 1998). However, "independent" knowledge of Russian Karelia's fabled old-growth forests could, according to activists, only be guaranteed if activists themselves, independently of state-experts whether in Finland or in Russia, established what really was going on. Activists' trust in official sources of knowledge on Karelia eroded to practically nothing, and they embarked on several years of inventorying the forests for themselves, and tracing the shady dealings of the logging companies they saw as corporate criminals supported by a state too willing to co-operate with private interests.

Given the history of forestry expertise in Finland, Berglund has argued that it should not be surprising how far activists follow the values of the state-led expert apparatus in legitimating their work (Michelsen 1995, Berglund 2000). Like the forest professionals, knowledge, specifically independent – *riippumaton* – knowledge only can guarantee justified intervention in the nation's natural heritage. They are not agroforesters, for sure; rather they are ecologists, but they see their ecological expertise as simply a better, more complex, and more independent form of knowledge about the natural world. In fact, the hundreds of young people who have campaigned on forest issues (but also water and wildlife) seem to rely on practically nobody's knowledge but their own – only theirs is sufficiently independent for them to base their demands. "We have the best knowledge base

about natural values of any environmentalists in Europe," Berglund was told. The young man in question was referring to the piles of maps, GIS equipment, and other related material lying around us in his organisation's office. It was frequently knowledgeability that was the highest form of legitimization of activism. A key element of activism across various groups is how proud they are of creating information that is not compromised by corporate power. In Finland this has meant creating extensive independent information about old-growth forests, but also activists informing themselves of the extensive legal changes implemented in the late 1990s relating to conservation and forestry, and of circulating this on the internet and in the form of publications (e.g. Ovaskainen et al. 1999).

HUNGARY

As in the case of Finland, Hungary's eco-politics were shaped by the Cold War and the political transformations of 1989. Following World War II, Hungary became a part of the Soviet bloc. The first ten years of state socialism in Hungary followed the Stalinist model, characterized by nationalization of industry, attempts to collectivize agriculture, and severe limits on civil liberties. Although a mass uprising in 1956 was suppressed through Soviet military intervention, in the subsequent decades, the socialist leadership of Hungary moved toward a more market-oriented economy and gradually expanded civil liberties. It was during this period of "goulash communism" that Hungarian environmentalism first appeared on the scene.

Hungary's environmental movement is the largest and most established in East-Central Europe, emerging in the early 1980s as a small assortment of underground and legal civil organizations. Although ornithological and nature protection associations have existed in Hungary off and on throughout this century, the 1980s oppositionist movement against the damming of the Danube River is widely acknowledged as the origin point of today's environmental movement by both environmentalists and the general public in Hungary. Spurred by increasing public distrust of the state's scientific bureaucracies following the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 (see Harper 2001), the Danube movement organized thousands of Hungarians in an ecological critique of the state. In the Danube movement, environmental issues acted as a wedge, exposing the role of the Hungarian state and Soviet-inspired development programs in ecological degradation. Although Hungary already had a few environmental organizations that were supported by the Communist Party, the Danube issue led to the creation of the Danube Circle and other unofficial environmental, anarchist, and peace organizations.

Participants in the Danube movement published essays and scientific reports in the *szamizdat* (underground) environmental press. This idealized vision of environmental politics as *független*, or "independent" of the state persists among many Hungarian environmentalists to this day.

The sweeping political changes of 1989 led to a realignment of dissident-style environmentalism. The environmental movement in the 1990s could no longer attract thousands of demonstrators as it had in the 1980s, when it was one of a handful of venues for political protest. However, after an initial retrenchment, the Hungarian environmental movement has diversified tremendously, with groups on local, regional, and national levels working on such themes as traffic, air quality, consumer education, waste management, and river ecosystems. In addition, various groups have formed ties with international environmental organizations, ranging from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to Action for Solidarity, Equality, Environment, and Development (ASEED) and World Bank Watch. Hungarian environmental activists played a key role in the domestic political opposition to state socialism in the 1980s. Now, they face the task of transforming the political culture of dissidence and their earlier critique of state socialist productivism into an environmental critique of the global market.

Harper participated in several environmental groups in Budapest, Hungary, between fall 1995 and summer 1997. By that time, activists had long since moved on from the Danube movement and were initiating new campaigns to address the emerging problems of the post-socialist era: consumer waste, land privatization, and a public landscape increasingly colonized by advertising (Harper 1999a, 1999b). At the same time, participation in environmental groups continued to be framed in terms of *függetlenség*, or "independence," a term tracing back to the dissident environmentalism of the 1980s.

TRANSFORMING CONCEPTS OF INDEPENDENCE BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

We want to focus here on the importance of the idea of independent knowledge and practice for the legitimacy of environmental policy. Finnish activists frequently stress the importance of providing *riippumaton*, or "independent," knowledge about the environment. Likewise, Hungarian environmentalists value the quality of *függetlenség*, which also means "independence." Interestingly, both the Finnish and Hungarian words derive from roots meaning quite literally, things that "do not hang on" anything else. What does the concept of "independence" provide for

Hungarian and Finnish activists? Why is "independent" better?

In Hungary, the concept of independence has transformed since the change of political systems. The 1980s Danube movement is widely perceived as a highwater mark of "independence." At that time, activists envisioned themselves as society organizing itself against the state, and "independence" implied independence from the Party and the State. In underground newsletters typed six copies at a time on carbon paper, the Danube Circle published the work of dissenting scientists who objected to the state bureaucracy's plan to dam the river. Scientists and journalists published these articles in the unofficial press at the risk of losing their jobs or permission to travel. *Szamizdat* publications gained credibility not only from persuasive evidence and argumentation, but also by virtue of their institutional autonomy.

Over the course of the first postsocialist decade, the concept of "independence" has transformed for Hungarian activists, while still remaining a key concept. Popular recognition of the Danube movement as an independent, societal force during the transition contributed an air of legitimacy to the environmental movement in the early 1990s. Some of the environmental groups founded at that time stressed this legacy in their names, charters, and collective histories—for example, the Independent Environmental Center (*Független Környezetvédelmi Központ*). Other groups that had been officially registered in the 1980s strove to establish their distance from the Communist Party. Members of the ELTE Klub, for example, acknowledged that as a university-based environmental group in the 1980s, they had been an official, registered group supervised by the Party's youth organization. In stories about the Danube days, however, they emphasized their conflicts with officials—like the time the club published news about the Danube Circle's activities in their newsletter, which was then censored by the Communist Youth Association.

Toward the mid-1990s, however, activists recognized that environmentalism needed to keep its hands clean of institutions other than the state, if it was to maintain credibility and internal coherence. The concept of "independence" has expanded to include affiliations with new political parties and corporations. Harper observed several instances where a group's "independence" was scrutinized or defended. For example, when she visited the Hatvan Environmental Association for the first time, she observed that their offices were in the building of the town's local chapter of the Hungarian Socialist Party. They hurried to

explain that although they shared physical space with the party, they were politically independent of it.

Other "independence" controversies arose when environmental groups accepted private sponsorship from corporations opposed by other environmental groups. The group Friends of City Cycling, for example, was chastised for accepting McDonald's sponsorship of Bike to Work Day at a time when other environmental organizations were criticizing McDonald's for introducing wasteful consumer packaging, promoting drive-thru dining, and colonizing the urban landscape of Budapest. In another instance, recycling and waste management groups criticized the Clean Air Action Group for printing advertisements for Tetra-Pak, an unrecyclable, newly imported packaging material, in its glossy newsletter. Eventually, the Clean Air Action Group stopped printing advertisements in its newsletter and moved to a plain, newsprint format. In these cases, "independence" implies the freedom for environmentalists to campaign against corporations, a relatively new practice for Hungarian activists.

In Hungarian activists' discourses on "independence," environmental expertise and activist practices are rhetorically separated from political party interests and global, corporate, economic motives. In the days of the Danube movement, "independence" implied voluntary activism as opposed to "mandatory" party activism, and it allowed activists to imagine themselves as society organizing itself against the state. Today, the concept of "independence" allows environmental groups to present themselves as a social wedge between the state and private corporations (Peet & Watts 1996). Although the Hungarian public at large is not widely involved in environmental groups, these organizations continue to command a great deal of public trust because of their reputation for being at a remove from the dirty, opportunistic world of political parties and opaque, government bureaucracies.

In the Finnish case, through most of the 20th century, environmental progress at the national level was guaranteed by state knowledge, embodied above all in expert institutions such as the influential Forest Research Institute. But by the late 1980s, activists suspected that the "state" could no longer be trusted to protect the interests of its citizens, and environmentalism was driving a wedge between "official" and "independent" (*riippumaton*) knowledge. This was disturbing since state-backed knowledge was also what constituted Finland both as a moral community and as an economic unit with a particular relationship to its natural resources which, through paper and pulp production, had created genuine wealth for the population (Berglund 2000).

The state, and its representatives in the forest cluster were considered guarantors of security, even as Finland's foreign relations were ambiguous, even embarrassing.

From 1990, the triumph of "the market" and neo-liberalism hit Finland and brought with it a massive recession. Political opposition was watered down, and the right found a new confidence whilst moves to "cut back the state" gained increasing popular support. The rather sad fate of the marginalized, particularly the young, was (in line with neo-liberal logic) deemed inevitable. However, environmentalists realigned themselves in this new political landscape, arguing that the independence of state institutions, and thus state-generated knowledge, had lessened under the influence of corporate power. But this did not mean the end of knowledge as a political tool, only that environmentalists discerned a potential difference between state-based knowledge and industry-based or corporate knowledge.

For activists independence remains crucial. However, it is not the same independence of which the champions of corporate power and capitalist freedom speak. Nor is it the legitimating move of those seeking to "certify" and "audit" new knowledge, for instance in the schemes to certify Finland's wood products through third parties to guarantee their continued saleability. It is independence from corporate bias, whether in alliance with or in opposition to, the state as a knowledge-producing and knowledge-legitimizing body.

It is not surprising then that it should be those involved in environmentalism, who, with greater or lesser explicitness, are at the forefront of challenging the neo-liberal vision along the old border between the East and the West. The Cold War put enormous constraints on Finns (and Hungarians) making it difficult for them to take their place alongside the truly independent nation-states of the world, and its end presented great hopes. To the extent that scarcity, competition and exclusive rights continued as metanarratives from the Cold War to the 1990s and since, these hopes for change have not been realized. We believe that in the distribution of ecological goods in particular, this continuity has meant deterioration rather than amelioration.

Ironically, in Finland, the end of the Cold War thus helped drive a wedge between the idea of state-knowledge as independent, and state-knowledge as a collective good. For there is still "independent" knowledge which can be put to corporate ends, which is valued separately from "independent" knowledge considered (at least relatively) autonomous from the vagaries of human frailty, including capitalist greed.

The problem is, however, that without the state's legitimating and grounding role, here as elsewhere, ecopolitics lacks the ontological as well as political basis it needs for judging who is responsible, who can be blamed for perceived wrongs, whether unemployment in forest-dependent regions or logging old-growth forests, and the arguments over trustworthy knowledge continue. Berglund sees 1989 as a watershed for Finland as well as for East-Central Europe. Finland's political right became more confident, entry into the European Union seemed ever more likely, and in relative economic terms, forestry lost out to the information technologies. From then on, the image of the Finnish self, protected by and loyal to the consensus-based forest-state, came under challenge. For more and more people, connections between good/truth and bad/lies have been shaken, but also connections between the state and corporate sectors have come under critical scrutiny. As the "special relationship" with the Soviet Union came to an end, the relationship between state, corporations and civil society also changed. Environmentalists have been among those who are explicitly rethinking this change differently from the political and commercial elites. It is environmentalists who most resist the shift of "truth" from state-backed to corporate-backed knowledge producers.

In Finland up to the 1990s, much environmental activism actually realigned itself with rather than against the ideals of state and official expertise, expertise that is supposed to be based on a disinterested, not profit-led, encounters with the world. Compared to corporate knowledge, state knowledge and state practices could be treated as independent and, ideally, not tainted by commercial interest. However, implicit in Finnish activists' recent work is the notion that official institutions are compromised by global corporate connections. This kind of activism helps push a wedge between civil society - the common good - and corporate, multinational power.

In both Finnish and Hungarian environmentalists' view, the work of activism does not "hang" on any politically motivated agenda, at least not in the first instance, but on their ability to make judgements independently of party politics or economic interests. This is important because the state - in the ideal imagined world of many environmentalists - should operate on the basis of universal science and unbiased judgement because it is accountable to its citizens, not just corporate power or geopolitical pressures. Relations of state-citizen accountability are precisely what are being reconfigured in discourses of independence and constitute a novel feature of "environmental citizenship."

Development workers, scholars, and activists themselves frequently perceive the presence of environmental organizations as a harbinger of emergent civil society (Lipshutz 1995). Anthropologists' investigations of "civil society" discourses, on the other hand, have questioned universalizing models of political transformation, exposing how such concepts as "citizenship" and "democracy" are deployed in varied forms by different actors in postsocialist countries (Gal and Kligman 2000, Hann and Dunn 1995). As ethnographers of social movements, we must attend to the ways in which activists make sense of local political cultures even as they attempt to transform them and effect social change.

NOTES

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